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8 June 1961

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ANALYSIS OF SOVIET HISTORIOGRAPHY  
(SOVIET WORLD HISTORY)

By Helmut Neubauer

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## FOREWORD

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JPRS: 4682

CSO: 1715-S/3

ANALYSIS OF SOVIET HISTORIOGRAPHY  
(SOVIET WORLD HISTORY)

[Following is the translation of an article by Helmut Neubauer in Osteuropa (Eastern Europe), Vol 11, No 2, Stuttgart, February 1961, pages 109-112.]

More than a generation had to pass before the social and political system which fancies itself to be the culmination of world history published its own version of world history. The high point, the fulness of time seemed to have arrived: man, whom fate had made a stranger to himself, has consciously returned to a humane existence, and he accounts now for his own being, his origin, his situation and his goals. The result of these reflections is the world history issued by the Academy of Sciences of the USSR, of which six volumes have appeared since 1955 (the seventh volume appeared at the end of 1960) with approximately 5000 printed pages of large size (Akademiya Nauk SSSR. Vsemirnaya istoriya v desyati tomakh. Glavn. red. E. M. Zhukov, Moscow: Gospolitizdat 1955 ff).

Seen with the eyes of the Soviets, a great catharsis occurred in 1917, the result of which was a new epoch in world history, compared to which everything that happened before was only prehistoric. Therefore all previous historiography is necessarily considered prehistoric, ahistoric or even anti-historic. Before the Soviet power appeared, there were objective reasons for the false methods of historiography which had to lead to false results: every historian was the prisoner of his class relationships and class interests, which narrowed his outlook. The sources which he found and the facts which he discovered are the valuable parts of his work. The situation has changed radically since the rise and development of Soviet power: the existence of the USSR proves the validity of historical materialism and thus the validity of the law of historical development discovered by the historical materialists. The historian who does not recognize these facts can no longer furnish "objective" reasons; rather he shows a subjective defect because he writes reactionary or cosmopolitan history against his better knowledge.

Just as Lenin did not want to reorganize or reform the state which he found, but wanted to destroy it, thus the party-bound and intentionally

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biased presentation of history by the Soviets tends to negate all previous evaluations, only historical raw material presented earlier is used sometimes. The new presentation of world history claims for the first time to describe historical reality without legend and invention, without errors -- even when committed in good faith -- and without intentional falsifications. Since the first six volumes are now out, it is possible to recognize a number of formal and structural principles which furnish material for a first preliminary evaluation.

The principle advanced with the greatest emphasis in the *Vsemirnaya istoriya* is that world history is a progressive process governed by laws. This axiom frees Soviet historiographers from scruples which they might have concerning the results and effect of earlier research with different tendencies, and at the same time it ties them to politico-philosophical principles which are presupposed to have proven absolutely valid. It would be too easy, however, to see the task of Soviet historiography only as that of clothing a skeleton of ideological theses with the meat of facts which will best prove their validity. The repeated mentioning of the fact that the "*Vsemirnaya istoriya*" does not claim to be the last word in historical science, nor to be complete, is without a doubt more than just a polite and modest figure of speech or an out for future changes in the historical picture. As much as they adhere to their basic position, the authors seem definitely to be aware of the problems inherent in a large-scale scientific enterprise. Several details of form indicate this: in Volumes 4 and 5 the chapters are listed consecutively, in the other volumes several chapters are combined into larger sections. Similar breaks in uniformity are found in the chronological tables which each volume contains: they are synchronous only in Volume 1, for Volumes 2 and 6 they are consecutive, for Volumes 3-5 they are distributed according to countries or groups of countries. Finally, the arrangement of the bibliography does not correspond to the chapters but rather to more conventional standards. In passing, we note that Stalin is mentioned as a "classic" (now listed among the "*osnovopolozhniki*" (founders)) of Marxist Leninism only in Volume 1 (1955).

Even considering these questions of purely formalistic character we ask ourselves whether the manifold aspects of actual historical happenings can be listed strictly according to set categories at all. If one accepts the Marxist-Leninist theory of the "immutable" law of history, one would be able to give each event a set place between the coordinates "time" and "property relationships". In this case neither arrangement nor chronological tables would offer any major problem; the uniformity would be achieved by the fact that content molds the form. The very question of the uniformity of historical processes is treated again in each volume of the "*Vsemirnaya istoriya*". They either indicate that for certain periods the sources are scarce and therefore relatively little can be said about them, or they mention the complexity of the division into periods, or they speak in general about the divergent state of development within the individual great epochs.

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The entire complex of problems might possibly be discussed under the aspect of the question whether in the arrangement of "vsemirnaya istoriya" the category of time or that of property relationships is the more important one. According to historical materialism, both may be considered "objective". Evidently time is the more important category. Therefore it is not surprising that the conventional division of history into periods of time has been maintained to a large extent, although the nomenclature has been changed by the introduction of "socio-economic" terms.

The "socialist society" has been established only in one part of the world so far, but since it is the society of the future, its epoch has already begun. The extent of the adherence to a traditional arrangement is also evident from the fact that Africa (except for the northern belt), America, Australia and Oceania are not dealt with until in the fourth and fifth volumes. While one part of humanity has already covered a large part of its way through history, another stands at the beginning of its path. If property relationships had been the decisive factor, nothing would have prevented the inclusion of the primitive societies of central Africa or Australia in the treatment of primitive society in the first volume. However, this method could easily have led to a "cosmopolitan" way of thinking, that is, national traits within the development of a society would have been blotted out.

Another debatable point is evident from the sequence of socio-economic epochs: if there were an "immutable" law, the delineations between epochs would be quite clear always at that point where the "step from quantity into quality" is taken in the new epoch. In "Vsemirnaya istoriya", however, much is left unsettled. There are many more transitional periods than those showing a number of ideally typical characteristics. This would not be objectionable if the validity claimed for the Marxist historical categories were only that of principles for heuristic purposes; it becomes a grave defect in the face of the claim of presenting a real and only way of historiography. Each new formation needed a long drawn-out incubation process. Thus the German peasant wars in the 16th century are considered the "first act of a bourgeois revolution", or, the independence war of the Netherlands is a "bourgeois revolution in the form of a fight for national freedom"; the actual capitalist epoch begins only with the English revolution, for which only the beginning accumulation of capital which is clearly evident in England is the ideally typical element.

In this case we stand at a crossing of temporal-vertical and territorial-horizontal coordinates; it is not an easy task for the collaborators of "Vsemirnaya istoriya" to understand and clearly present the theoretical unity of the processes of world history as a simultaneous variety of forms of reality. These are declared to be dependent upon natural, geographic, historical, "and other" conditions, and they generate in cultural as well as in political life the very variety which creates a problem for Soviet historiographers. The concept of a historical law includes a claim for the general validity of the attempt at explaining history by the theories

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of historical materialism. "Vsemirnaya istoriya" claims to be the logical application of these theories, but it seems that of all these new "laws" only the fact remains that everything is in constant flux.

Now the question necessarily arises whether anything essentially new has been achieved, as compared to the modern historiography which cannot follow Marx nor those who think they are his only logical successors. An additional factor is that a number of exceptions from the law are being acknowledged without reservation, for instance the fact that the Slavic and Germanic people have bypassed the socio-economic formation of a slave-holding society. Accordingly, the "conditions" characteristic for these, which are the cause of the variety of forms, were evidently so strong that they caused a break in the historical law. Could we not conclude from this that here what is theoretically secondary is elevated to a primary power in historical development.

Finally, the claim made by "Vsemirnaya istoriya" that all progress is the result of human labor, that at all times man is the greatest productive power in society, is remarkable. Doubtlessly this means according a higher value to man as a causative power in history as compared to the "economic materialism" which had been discredited 25 years ago, and compared to the "mechanistic" concept; especially since Stalin's linguistic letters -- at least for the socialist epoch of history -- the thesis of the active role of the superstructure has been accepted. Thus the history of production again becomes to a large extent the history of man, who is subject to forces which since Marx and Engels have been considered as "superstructure", thereby being derivative forces.

From this the actual goal of "Vsemirnaya istoriya" becomes visible: "The study of history helps the workers and all progressive people to recognize the action of the laws of social development, it arms them with the capability of utilizing these objective laws in the revolutionary fight for freedom as well as in building the new socialistic way of life." In other words: From the knowledge of the past, man gains the right understanding of his present as well as a scientifically founded view of the future. The therapy of world history which is characterized by the class struggle becomes then the way which historical materialism prescribes. It affirms the revolution and sees in it the only means for the auto-therapy of man.

Not only because of the increase in material are three whole volumes reserved for presentation of the time after 1917. Since Soviet power was constituted in 1917, the way of the proletariat of the world is supposed to have been prescribed clearly and concretely, and Communism is no longer a visionary chiliastic goal. Under these conditions "Vsemirnaya istoriya" is not only an informative, but mainly a pedagogical instrument: Those who study it and receive their orientation from it are expected to become conscious of the fact that they are in accord with an objective view of world history and thereby to be educated for action. This becomes especially clear in the introductory section of the first volume.

The consistent adherence to the Marxist-Leninist terminology serves a similar end of developing consciousness. The epithet "great" is not

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accorded to persons but rather to events, such as the German peasant war or the French revolution. Absolutistic France and the Russian imperium, characterized by the "krepostnoye pravo" (law of slavery) are both designated as "feudal"; thus both historical phenomena are classified in the same socio-economic formation and at the same time formally distinguished.

There is no Soviet historian of any consequence who did not have a part in the gigantic enterprise of Soviet "world history". In the preface -- not in the table of contents -- the names of the authors of individual chapters are given. The size of the editorial staff -- at first 22, now 20 persons -- leads to the conclusion that the manuscripts have been worked over intensively by the editors, so that we can say with some justification that the present educational opinion of Soviet historiography has found its expression in "Vsemirnaya istoriya". The collective character of the work means without a doubt greater precision in the presentation, and at the same time distributes the responsibility for the work onto numerous shoulders.

The "Vsemirnaya istoriya" contains a number of interesting features which transcend Marx' initial theories which have for a long time been recognized as stimulating, although not absolutely valid, concepts; here we shall only mention that world history is no longer grouped around the history of the Mediterranean countries in the widest sense. The role and importance of slavic people is emphasized much more than in earlier presentations, without falling into exaggerated nationalism, as did Ocherki po istorii SSSR (Sketches from the History of the USSR).

Several questions remain open which require explanation: The often moralizing pathos of the introductory sections form a strange contrast to the inherent logic which historical materialism ascribes to world historical development. Also: if the dialectical law means a general development from the lower to the higher and from the simple to the complicated, the dialectic of the classes should on the other hand lead to a radical primitivization of social development which would cause a revolution as the last way out. Evidently the recognition of an "immutable" law of history causes some sort of horror vacui; when there is a lack of definitive material, they make do with theoretical interpretations. From this there ensues the question of the relationship between historical truth and a sureness based on ideology only.

There is reason to suppose that such questions posed by non-Soviet historiographers will occur to the Soviets as well. This would broaden the problems to extend from the strictly historical to a profound questioning of the essence of human existence.